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'TIL HE TAKES A WIFE

These were two people oblivious of others and in their chosen isolation they made Barbara think once more about the past

By
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I suppose the reason that particular forty-five minutes in my rather average life stands out at all now some weeks later is because there is always a quality of unreality when privacy is exposed in public.

Like someone suddenly bursting into tears on the subway train. Or happening on your boss with his children in a park on Sunday, and he holds the smallest one up for you to admire with almost pathetic pleasure, praising and coaxing the child in a voice you have never heard him use before.

In the first place, I wasn't supposed to be listening to the conversation; but, of course, I was. Everybody does that, sitting in a crowded dining room, with just the width of a placemat between the tables.

If you happen to be eating with a friend, the talk on each side is lifted like fragments of a puzzle during the silences between the two of you. Usually, it's dull, surface stuff: "... really? Well, I find her styling the same, week after week. You know. I mean I never look any different and ..." Something like that.

Occasionally, you may pick up something richer, more tantalising, a canape that makes you yearn to tilt rudely sideways and ask for more: a lopsided version of last night's quarrel, or a description of a love affair doomed to failure.

Instead, you nod encouragingly at your companion, continuing the illusion of eating alone together in some sort of soundproof bubble.

All this is changed when you eat alone, as I did one broiling noon hour. Every established department store of any substance has its air-conditioned dining room, probably near the top of the building, close by the executive offices, cool, carpeted, predictable.

No matter that the food is the same stuff swimming in steaming aluminium vats in the cafeteria across the floor!

If that sounds a little snobbish, let me tell you that I normally eat in the cafeteria, when my stamina is up and my economy down. I like the camaraderie and confusion, the whole atmosphere of choice, I guess.

Everything from the large, aproned lady who doles out the stew with hearty scoops and splashings, to the tough little rolls and inevitable mounds of cottage cheese on one limp lettuce leaf.

But on that day, the heat, the beginnings of a headache behind my eyes, and the desperate need to be served by somebody urged me toward the regulated, ancient ritual of the store dining room.

Here, I could depend on it, life and lunch would always be the same. I stood alone by the velvet-rope divider, casually taking in the familiar scene.

To page 88

'TIL HE TAKES A WIFE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87

The monstrous glittering chandeliers, oddly jarring at 11.30 in the morning, and giving an unsettling splatter of spots before the eyes when you stared directly at them, as though someone had just snapped a flash bulb; the good old business men's upper gallery, where I had once inadvertently ascended a year ago, only to be firmly sent down again.

You must either be a man, the waitress informed me, or have a male companion. When I had asked why, she looked uneasily around her, floundering for an answer as simple as a menu order to satisfy me.

Glancing up there now, I mused on the delicate mechanism of earnest business minds so easily shaken by the presence of a young woman eating alone among them. Ah, comes the revolution, I thought, feeling the old annoyance replaced by the more immediate rumblings of hunger.

Across the dark broadloom, scanning me with her kind blue eyes, one of the hostesses beckoned me with that queenly in-turning wave of hand.

"One?" she asked, a definite tilt down her voice. Disappointment, I imagine.

I wanted to say, "No, not really. There are four Coldstream Guards and several businessmen with me," but I didn't.

It would have been a lapse into that earlier, to-hell-with-it humor that seemed to plague me as a child in church, or during a particularly stuffy lecture in college.

I gave in happily to it the other day, when a shivering advance man pushed open the door of our advertising firm and huskily announced that "the Big One" was on his way up.

I went to the outer office, flung myself down on the floor, kneeling, with arms extended, worshipful and properly prostrate. I think it was the first time the big one had ever really noticed me.

The hostess bustled me to a small table, not asking, in the half-empty room, if I minded sharing it. I would have minded, in the mood I was in. Seated close by, and in the midst of ordering, were the two people whose conversation would completely absorb my attention.

While I pondered the deceptive variety implied in the food choices, a woman's rich, low voice said: "Well, I'm sorry you didn't like my choice, that's all. I think it suits you."

"There's nothing wrong with it, Mother. It's simply that the other jacket was something people notice when you enter a room. It was more expensive, of course. But these days, we get only what we pay for. This one's fine. It's just not as elegant."

I felt my eyes sliding sideways to assess the jacket. An interesting light grey tweed, neither ordinary nor elegant. And you wouldn't notice it when he entered the room. A point for him.

"Have you decided what you'll have, Mother, or would you like me to order for you?" A slight edge to his high voice.

"I haven't the faintest idea. You choose." She turned a heavy silver bracelet round on her wrist. "My choices don't seem to be terribly dependable today."

"The veal, I think," the son scarcely acknowledged the waitress beside him, "and salad with it, please."

As he talked, I was able to examine his mother more closely, for she had no apparent interest in me. She would be around seventy two or three, probably classically beautiful years ago.

There was an air of expensive blondness about her, still lingering in spite of the dark grey hair swept back under the blue velvet hat. Ivory suede gloves lay limply beside her glass, curled like dead hands carefully preserved.

I ordered Creamed Turkey on a Black Cherry Ring, no dessert, tea.

"I can't imagine what we'll do with the Cuthberts tomorrow," declared the son, smoothing out the tablecloth.

As he spoke he would rearrange things . . . pushing the cutlery carefully into place, refolding the napkin, tucking the tiny card advertising today's cocktail suggestion back into its slot with elaborate precision. His hands, unlike his words, gave the impression of orderliness and plan.

He sighed. "I guess we'll end up doing what we've done for the last forty years of my life . . . just cart them round the city."

I was beginning to feel a sense of pity for the Cuthberts, for all I knew on their way now toward our city, bags in the car and eyes bright with anticipation.

"Should we take them out to lunch?" asked his mother.

"I suppose we'll have to."

"They're good company for me. Nina is always so cheerful — not pretending it, but really happy to see me."

"Well then, you entertain them, Mother. You show them the galleries and the new buildings — again. Frankly, I'm fed up with the stories of John's success in prefab whatever-it-is, and those two children pawing through my desk every year."

"They're really quite well-behaved."

"Then what are they like in their own home!"

The waitress returned to place their lunches down and, for a few tense moments they busied themselves poking and tasting, as though they were hired to test a new sort of manufacturer's product.

"It's only for three days, Jack," his mother said softly. "I can't imagine why these things bother you."

"They don't bother me. They bore me."

The son was seated right beside me, so that I was unable to see his face, except for swift glimpses of profile, the sort of vague outlined impression you get from quickly cut cardboard silhouettes done in fair booths.

He was younger-looking than I had expected, with regular features, a softness about the chin, the color of a pale mushroom.

"A lot of things seem to bore you right now, Jack. Perhaps you might take a trip alone this summer. A short one, of course. There are lots of very pleasant cruises . . ."

Her voice trailed off like a boat slipping away from the dock, a trace of wistfulness following in the wake.

"Don't tempt me, Mother," he was almost snarling, "all those women prowling round, hiding copies of The Sensuous Woman in their purses? I might just come home married! But I suppose we could always live with you, couldn't we?"

I can't decide even now which was worse, the tension in the air, or the nagging curiosity that compelled me to keep peeking at the seeping sores under the bandages.

It was a little like watching group therapy without being allowed to contribute, and with the added discipline of seeming not to hear.

Some part of the game they were playing dug into me, making me uncomfortable, but I couldn't understand why. I was reminded sharply of the evening I heard my seven-year-old niece reading proudly from her book, "Here is Jack. He can run. He can run fast. Run, Jack, run!"

They were beginning to depress me. I tried to concentrate on the quivering ruby ring before me, finally managing to extricate a small, square morsel of turkey. It looked as though it had been hatched by a computer.

"In Paris, they do this so differently," the son was saying mildly.

His mother did not look up. "What is this, Jack?"

"The slices of veal and ham in a rich cheese sauce."

"It's quite good, Jack. Really quite good."

To page 89

"Well," he went on, ignoring her observation. "It's much nicer in France. The cheese is sharper, smoother . . . not clotted up like this. And the meat is paper thin. Paper thin."

"You should have been a chef," she declared coldly.

The son sat suddenly upright and forward, as though someone had slapped him hard on the back. He didn't bother to lower his voice.

"Too bad you hack at it like that, Mother. You'd get so much more out of the flavor combining the three things. See? Like this! Small bits of each of them. Couldn't you manage it better?"

It was an unfair comment, touching her senility nerve with the cold, distant instrument of his own relative youth.

She had displayed no hand-quivering, no blankness, no evidence of downhill aging in manner or movement . . . certainly not in speech.

Perhaps that is why the remark did not seem to hurt her. It was old, familiar eroded ground, already trodden over too many times to make it a threat.

And so, she continued to eat in her own way as if he were not there, condemning his malice with her indifference.

I watched her covertly, in almost grudging admiration of her control, imagining her presiding at an executive desk somewhere: perhaps ironing out business details over lunch, upstairs in the forbidden gallery.

But her son, allowed up there, would be lost. He was far too uneasy about himself, too petulant. How funny, really, that his mother could only go up there with him! Or was it just sad that he probably would not go up there without her?

Something was wrong. Normally, I can eat alone, overhearing snatches of conversation with idle amusement, or detached pity. I felt too involved this time, too much a part of it. Almost as though I needed this damned discomfort. Without warning, a latchkey turned slowly in my mind, opening a door to reveal another time and another place. I sipped at the hot, clear tea remembering . . .

We were on his small sailboat, moving lightly before an even steady wind, with that rhythmic dipping-lifting motion I still associate with absolute peace. There was a changing greyness to the water, no sun; but even that was beautiful to me, because I was where I wanted to be.

He was twenty-one then, three inches taller than my five-feet-eight, slim, always a little preoccupied, not particularly handsome, if your definition leans toward the Paul Newman school.

Somewhere in the few months that had gone before, we had evolved from wary, polite dating to an infinitely more comfortable relationship.

I had liked his humor, his lack of affection, his easy warmth. I cannot remember the word "love" ever being used. If he had said it, then it could not have been in the heavy sense, for I only associate him with the word "affection" now.

But on the boat that day, with goose bumps raised by the wind and his closeness, and the singing freedom we both shared, I had the feeling that we would soon marry.

A short time later, I was invited to spend a weekend at the cottage, the usual way to let the family inspect you in an informal homy atmosphere, I suppose.

Space being limited, I shared his elder sister's room, the kind of hypocritical arrangement you enthusiastically accept when you'd really rather sleep with the brother.

The first evening, a picnic supper was set outside on a green-blue cloth, with matching plates, tiny candles in yellow hurricane lamps, all the right things.

His mother was lovely, there is no other word for it. She moved like a lithe, sure little butterfly from place to place, touching this, straightening that, talking as I helped her.

"We lost Ray's father when Ray was still a child, only eleven. He's told you that, of course?" She was frowning prettily at the wild flowers I had contributed to the table.

"Mmmm. Nice. But let's put them back here. Better, don't you think?" I felt like a small child having her first drawing corrected.

"Ray likes things nice, just so, you know. It's not really a fault, though, is it?"

I said, "I don't think so," but she had turned her attention to the baked spareribs. I could see him down by the dock, securing the boat for the night, his stooping figure etched almost black against the mauve water. She had seen my glance.

"You've noticed how wonderful he is with women, I suppose?" My God, how dumb I felt, nodding yes all the time!

"We think that comes from having to be the man of the house for so long." She laughed, a delightfully tinkling sound, almost like a little girl's.

Her teeth were marvellous. And I was to notice them more as the evening, and the next day, and the weekend wore on. Inch by inch, they were to bite gently into me, tearing off delicate little bits.

When I was uncertain and nervous, not too unusual at nineteen, she was sure and articulate.

When I ventured a solid, liberal opinion on abortion — a subject she had carefully raised — her soft blue eyes clouded over with temperance for my youth, and she began a reasonable, expertly constructed rebuttal that made reactionaries look like God's chosen children.

By Sunday afternoon, aching for some time away to gather my flagging army, I suggested to Ray that we put some wine and food in the boat and take off for a while.

It came as no suprise to be told that his mother had already assembled a cold buffet . . . early, so that everyone would have plenty of time to prepare for the ride back to town. Reasonable. And nice. The buffet was nice, too. Ray liked things nice.

It was only the beginning. Once she had sized up her adversary, for that is what I had become, nothing could save us but Ray himself. I like to think that he made a valiant swing at it, but when, at last, I had the courage to face him squarely with the situation, I knew it was all over.

"She's had one hell of a life, Barb," he told me earnestly. He believed it. "Sure, she's got some money. But especially now, she's depending on me, and Jill, too. Our company is the least we can give her."

He looked desperately at me, his eyes sick with indecision, and he spat out the one argument that meant something to him.

"Damn it all, she bought me the boat, didn't she?"

I never saw him again. But I did happen to meet Jill a couple of years ago. We were waiting for subway trains going in opposite directions, and it became one of those fleeting, frustrating conversations you have when automation dictates the time at your disposal.

The little boy with her stared solemnly at me, in that frank, puzzled way children have. He looked like Ray, and I felt something undone and not quite dead stinging hotly behind my eyes.

We talked about her, and her husband, for a moment, cautiously, circling the subject we both knew would come.

Finally, she said, simply, "He sold the boat, Barbara." (I pictured it being painted purple and assaulted by a gang of suburban pirates, and I hated them.) "He dates, but no one stays serious for long."

To page 90

'TIL HE TAKES A WIFE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 88

I felt uncomfortable under her compassion. The growl of the oncoming train brought both relief and despair. She was moving closer to the platform edge, gently guiding the boy with her hand.

"Remember that square old saying, 'My son is my son 'til he takes him a wife . . . ?' Well, I'm the daughter, so you know where that leaves me."

As she helped the boy through the doors, I gave one of those silly waves and meaningless grins we seem to use at all the wrong times.

. . . . . .

The waitress was back, enquiring if there would be anything else. I shook my head, only to discover that the pain had shifted to my temples. I refilled the tea cup, trying to gulp down a headache tablet without having it melt in my mouth first.

The couple beside me had reached dessert, a wedge of pale pink daubed with whipped cream. "What's this, Jack?" She worried it daintily with a spoon tip. The son allowed himself a mood of spontaneous good humor, resting back easily in the chair.

"This," he chuckled, "Always reminds me of Mrs. Allen. Bavarian Cream! Remember she always served Bavarian Cream when we were there? And remember the strange satin hats she wore, with the hideous rhinestone buckles sewn on?

"Didn't she have a fox fur piece? Sure she did! Seems to me there was a real fox face shrunk down at the tip of it. I thought the damn thing could bite!"

He was laughing now, naturally and kindly, urging her to walk back with him. Maybe it was his truce flag. I

'TIL HE TAKES A WIFE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 89

don't know; but whatever his motive, she was refusing to play.

Leaving the dessert half finished, she rested her chin on the tips of her fingers and stared moodily off into space.

"Mrs. Allen had a very difficult life. But then, I wouldn't expect you to know that. You were very young when we were seeing her regularly."

"Difficult! With all that money? Why on earth would she degenerate into such a blank-minded mess," his anger was making him stutter, "just because her husband died? Always laughing too much at nothing, or dripping tears over old photographs! She really got on my nerves."

He stabbed at the last wavering morsel of dessert with such a fierce forking gesture that he appeared to be killing Mrs. Allen, the Cuthberts, maybe all the women in the whole world.

The waitress stood at his elbow, smiling down at the mother. "Is there anything else, perhaps more coffee?"

For the first time, the old lady's face changed expression. A wide, brimming smile, surprising in its intensity and charm, cleared and softened her face. "No, thank you. It was absolutely lovely. We enjoyed it."

When the bill was placed face down in the centre of the table, the son, in a move as carefully executed as a minuet, slowly extended his fingers toward it.

His timing was incredibly good . . . not too much of a delay, but never, never in time; because his mother's slim hand darted like a snake's head to claim the hold she had on him.

She peered at the bill. "Mmm. A bit more expensive than I had expected."

"Isn't it always?" Flat dislike in his voice now. "Wasn't that the reason you picked this jacket?"

After they had gone, I remained at my table, nursing the last bit of tea, looking round the room to the people now filling the room to capacity. If I felt at all guilty about eavesdropping, it was because of the quality of what I had heard, not the act of listening itself.

Their preoccupation with each other, the fact that they could be so unaware and uncaring of someone just a breath away from them, seems astounding. But that was how it was; other people ceased to exist as they jousted away their lives with needles.

Questions leaped into my head, dangling unanswered, in soap-opera repetition. What kind of little boy had he been, pressing arrogantly forward in his high chair to gulp something "good for him"?

Was he soothed with candy, or cuffed knuckle-side up when he cried? Maybe he would lie in the snug half dark of his room, a model plane floating from thread above him, and pretend himself tall, grown-up and free.

Had his mother been a laughing woman then, playing other games with little Jack? Jack-Be-Nimble, Jack-Be-Quick . . . Jack And The Beanstalk . . . Little Jack Horner. Jack the Ripper.

I felt a shudder of revulsion, for I had perhaps been allowed a glimpse of Ray and his mother. He could be like that now, not as old, of course, but past accepting her gifts with delight, carping at her in private, and only a few years away from doing it as expertly in public.

I checked my watch hastily, trying to shake the trembling outrage that came of not being able to change a situation. Just enough time to get back and make at least a start on the coat promotion.

As I got up, a hostess with crinkly aluminium hair and support hose gestured a hungry couple toward my table. I checked the impulse to tell them to forget the creamed turkey on a black cherry ring, and to go to Paris for the veal, and trotted quickly toward the open elevator.

Heat smothered me again when the door slid closed, just narrowly missing its mechanical chance to decapitate a breathless man who lunged past at the last moment.

We exchanged small, rueful grins of commiseration. Six, five, four . . . the floors lit up in silent square reminders as we glided past.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered my brother solemnly telling me, years ago, that if the elevator cable ever broke, I must try to jump off the floor at the same moment the thing hit the ground, thus avoiding the bone-breaking impact.

Three, two, main. I moved out into the crowd, thinking rather fondly of my brother, when I saw them again, about ten feet ahead of me. The elegant old lady was greeting her friend gaily, but a bit too loudly, brushing cheeks swiftly and stiffly in an ancient ritual all of us observe in one way or another when a meeting is unexpected.

"Irene! How nice!" She turned to extend an ivory-gloved hand to the younger man standing slightly behind her. Eyes glowing with pride, she pulled him by the hand, urging him toward her friend.

"Jack, this is Irene Keller, from the bridge club. You *remember my Jack, don't* you, Irene? My son."

I left the store, drained and a little numb, as I might be after a particularly touching play. Poor Jack-in-the-box. Poor Ray. But no longer poor me.

I suppose I had faced the fact, at last, that there was no way to carry their burden for them. They simply did not want to be free badly enough. Maybe they never would. In the end, the decision had to be theirs, not mine.

Relief washed softly over me as the old guilts and frustrations dropped from my mind, like a small stone finally plunked from the hand, into the sea.

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